



FARMINGDALE STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS MU ZIJIAN AND YANG XI POINT TO A MAP OF THEIR HOMETOWNS OF BEICHUAN AND WENCHUAN THAT WERE DEVASTATED BY THE MAY 12 EARTHQUAKE IN CHINA. Photo by Suzanne Ma

From The Far East To Farmingdale Chinese Earthquake Victims Take Up Studies On L.I.

BY SUZANNE MA

Mu Zijian was preparing for his Chinese culture class at Sichuan University in western China when his desk began to shake, the floor beneath his feet rumbled, and the walls of his fifth-floor dormitory room swayed from side to side.

At first he thought it was an airplane taking off at nearby Chengdu airport. Or, maybe an airplane had crashed. Zijian stumbled into the hallway, where students, some in underwear and no shoes, were rushing down the stairwells.

"Everyone cried out, 'It's an earthquake! Just run, just run!'"

So he ran. At first, the adrenaline rush was exciting.

"But when I got to the fourth and third floor and saw the perspiration on people's faces, it was awful," he remembers. "I realized it was not exciting. Maybe something bad had happened."

Something terrible did happen on that May 12 afternoon: A 7.9-magnitude earthquake shook mountainous Sichuan Province. The worst-hit areas were Wenchuan County and Zijian's hometown in Beichuan County, but tremors were felt as far away as Beijing and Shanghai.

Nearly 70,000 people were killed. More than 18,000 are missing and almost 5 million people are homeless.

Zijian made it out safely and immediately called his parents. But, like hundreds of others, he could not reach home. Zijian said he must have tried to call 100 times.

"I just prayed and prayed that my

parents were still alive. The whole night I could not sleep," he says. He listened to radio news reports, but when the radio's battery died in the middle of the night, "I just burst into tears."

Hours later, news reached America, coming as a literal wake-up call for Kailin Zhu via her clock radio. Zhu, a Manhattan investment real estate broker, was devastated and felt something needed to be done. So, with her friends, investment real estate attorney Yao Fu Bailey and New York City employee John Seminerio, she launched into fund-raising mode.

Struggling with finding an appropriate channel to fund the earthquake victims, they first considered charities on the ground in China. But donations had to be routed through the Chinese counsel in New York, and many people were not happy with sending money to the Chinese government, Zhu explains. So they decided to give to an American nonprofit group instead.

Partnering with the Chinese-American Planning Council, Inc., their Sept. 18 benefit dinner in Queens is one way of funding the inaugural State University of New York (SUNY) China 150 program. The program's goal: relocate 53 men and 97 women by plucking them from the quake's epicenter and transporting them to 22 colleges around the state.

"I think everybody was terrifically affected by the scale of the earthquake," says Nicholas Rostow, university counsel and vice chancellor for SUNY legal affairs. "One of the things we

could help with was to offer the opportunity to help students to continue their education and to develop, in spite of a terrible tragedy."

The program came together quickly, due to speedy cooperation between SUNY, the U.S. Department of State, China Scholarship Council (an international program providing U.S. educational funding to Chinese students) and the highest levels of the Chinese government: Premier Wen Jiabao personally endorsed the initiative.

Out of 2,000 applicants, 150 students were selected, based on English proficiency, leadership skills, ability to adapt to a foreign environment and commitment to volunteerism. The program also took into account students from the Zang (Tibetan) and Qiang ethnic minority groups who live in the epicenter region. The students, mostly sophomores and juniors, received passports, visas and plane tickets (paid for by the Chinese government), and by mid-August were on SUNY campuses.

The program will cost SUNY \$3.7 million for tuition, dormitory fees, food and spending money. Private donations are needed to support the initiative.

When Zhu heard about the program, she knew where donations should go. She is

hoping that awareness of the SUNY China 150 program will ignite the generosity of New Yorkers.

"Education is valued in Chinese civilization beyond all else," she points out. "What better way than to devote the money to one cause—the students, the future leaders of Sichuan?"

The students have pledged to help rebuild Sichuan's local economy and infrastructure, after completing the program in May/June of '09.

Four weeks ago, Zijian and classmate Yang Xi, a 20-year-old Sichuan University finance student, arrived at Farmingdale State University, as SUNY China 150 participants; 17 other Chinese students are part of the program at Farmingdale. Zijian's and Xi's families survived, but in Xi's hometown, Wenchuan, nearly 20,000 people—one-fifth of the population—died. His home was destroyed and his parents, farmers in the countryside, will be living in a tent for years before they have enough money to rebuild their house.

"We've come here both for us and for our country," Yang says, "because we know this earthquake didn't and could not knock us down." ☎



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